

For Brecht, an Ironic Encore

A decade after an iconoclastic biography shook up Brecht studies, many scholars argue that creeping deification, and neglect, have done worse damage to the German writer's legacy

By PETER MONAGHAN

Bertolt Brecht, darling of the leftist theater for much of the 20th century, was a scheming, duplicitous, unwashed man. And wasn't he the one who didn't write any of his own works?

You may have heard so -- at a dinner party, say. For that, thank John Fuegi, a distinguished professor of comparative studies at the University of Maryland at College Park.

Today even nonspecialists parrot the claims that Mr. Fuegi made in the 732 pages of *Brecht and Co.: Sex, Politics, and the Making of the Modern Drama* (Grove Press, 1995). Though acknowledging the originality and power of Brecht's poetry, the biographer charged that as a playwright, he repackaged the work of collaborators and called it his own. Those actions were said to have deprived his colleagues -- many of them women -- of authorial credit and substantial royalties.

From 1969 to 1989, Mr. Fuegi edited 14 installments of *The Brecht Yearbook*, an annual journal published by the International Brecht Society, which he co-founded. He also has written or edited 17 books, including his much-consulted study of the playwright as stage director, *Bertolt Brecht: Chaos, According to Plan* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

His substantial attack on Brecht's authorship claims and his dissection of the playwright's character flaws should have revolutionized the field. But a decade later, many scholars say that the playwright has largely survived the biography.

Even so, they add, the Brecht legacy is shaky, as a result of problems that have nothing to do with Mr. Fuegi's book. Broadway theaters shy away from Brecht, whose plays require large casts and complex staging. Those productions that are mounted are often of inferior quality. And Brecht studies itself is cluttered with banal, hagiographic, and fussily philological monographs and articles.

Worst of all, they say, Brecht has suffered a blow that is fatal to artistic revolutionaries: He is now a "classical" author.

"What has amazed me over the last 10 years," says Sander L. Gilman, a renowned Germanist who is a professor of liberal arts and sciences and medicine at the University of Illinois at Chicago, "is that there hasn't been much interest in rethinking Brecht,

because no one is really interested."

Collaborative Damage

Born in 1885, Bertolt Brecht revolutionized German literature with his sharp intellect, practical Marxism, and rank opportunism. Plays such as *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941), *The Good Woman of Szechuan* (1943), and *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) examined war, the clash of capitalism and socialism, and other issues of his time. His theories shook up the status quo of theater. Through insistence on stylized acting, he sought to strip sentimentality from the action of his plays. His writings advocated a "distancing" between audiences and characters -- and even of actors from their characters.

After his death, in 1956, a cadre of acolytes controlled access to his archives and strove to preserve an air of immortality about the works and the man. That is, until Mr. Fuegi wrote *Brecht and Co.*

It is not that the biographer doubts that Brecht's plays deserve their stature as classics. He simply argues that Brecht did not write substantial portions of them -- or, in the case of some plays, much of them at all. His book asserts that Brecht, a charismatic and sexually gluttonous Svengali, persuaded a string of lovers, male and female, to write for him in a "sex for text" arrangement. Some of them did so for love. Others shared his vision of a worldwide socialist revolution.

Further, claims Mr. Fuegi, the worldwide "Brecht industry," with the International Brecht Society at its center, has lionized the playwright as sole author at the expense of collaborators like Ruth Berlau, Elisabeth Hauptmann, and Margarete Steffin. Their feminine touch, Mr. Fuegi argues, provided humanizing elements in plays that were at first cold and callous in their depictions of social disarray and war.

Scholars have long known that Brecht used Hauptmann's translation of John Gay's play *Beggar's Opera* (1765) as the foundation for *The Threepenny Opera*. But Mr. Fuegi insists that she wrote almost all of that play. In a 2002 revision of the biography, he says Robert Vambéry, literary adviser to the premiere of *The Threepenny Opera*, in 1928, showed him rehearsal copies and early editions of that work and six others written from 1925 to 1933, in which "we see that Elisabeth Hauptmann was recognized with Brecht as coequal author."

In an interview, Mr. Fuegi says the typography on those copies -- the equivalent billing of Hauptmann, Brecht, and the composer, Kurt Weill -- establishes this equal authorship. (The texts are now held by the University of Maryland at College Park and are being readied for public access.)

The iconoclasm of *Brecht and Co.* roiled the world of Brecht scholarship. The book's portrayal of the playwright as a monstrous man who adopted whatever pose suited his artistic and personal goals -- including throwing off his bourgeois origins to embrace the look of a working-class stiff -- rankled some. The explicit comparison of Brecht's

"coldness" to that of Hitler and Stalin drew outrage from others.

Several Brecht scholars undertook to expose a purportedly large number of inaccuracies and mistranslations in the biography. Even Michael Meyer, a seasoned drama critic who was clearly inclined to like *Brecht and Co.*, in the end exclaimed in *The New York Review of Books*, "Did no editor at Grove Press read the book?" It was, he said, "verbose and uneven, occasionally so bad that it reads like a translation of someone with an uncertain command of English."

As various editions and translations of his book appeared -- British, Hebrew, French, and German, the last expanded by 400 pages -- Mr. Fuegi and his critics traded claims about mistakes and corrections and about the extent of biographical license. When the French edition appeared, one of Brecht's heirs sued the scholar in an unsuccessful attempt to have sales of the book stopped.

Undaunted by the bad reviews and harsh judgments, Mr. Fuegi presses on, declaring that sources like Mr. Vambery tell him that "if anything, you've radically understated how bad the situation was."

Partisan Warfare

Until now, America's most distinguished Brecht scholar, Eric Bentley, has not weighed in publicly on the controversy. "John is a friend of mine, but we're not always in agreement," he says in his New York apartment.

Now 87, Mr. Bentley is a veteran of many years of direct collaboration with the playwright. As a translator and producer of many Brecht plays, and the author of many of his own, Mr. Bentley is one of the most influential figures in American theater of the past 60 years. The response to Mr. Fuegi's book was not to his liking. It was too often ad hominem, he believes, and almost as undermined by errors as *Brecht and Co.* may have been.

Among the book's strengths, Mr. Bentley says, are its scholarship about Brecht's relation to Communism and the Soviet Union: Mr. Fuegi "had a lot that was new to say -- new in the sense that a lot of the other scholars hadn't done their homework. Most of them knew nothing about Communism, except those that were Communists, from East Germany. I thought that was a very solid contribution, and there should be more of that."

As for the biographer's theory of alternative authorship, "I didn't go for that at all," says Mr. Bentley. He tried, after seeing early drafts, to dissuade Mr. Fuegi from focusing so much on that subject. And when Mr. Fuegi asked him to contribute a blurb to the published version, he declined.

Despite his misgivings, Mr. Bentley does argue that Mr. Fuegi's thesis has some basis in fact. For example, "I believe that Elisabeth Hauptmann did write *Happy End*," he says. (The work was copyrighted under her pseudonym, "Dorothy Lane.") "But *Happy End* is

not a good play. I'd call it good imitation Brecht. To me it doesn't prove anything special that she wrote it."

Eyewitness Accounts

Mr. Bentley takes a view that is common among Brecht scholars: Brecht was the controlling force in the Brecht enterprise, and his collaborators freely went along with that arrangement.

Paula J. Hanssen, a professor of German at Webster University, in Missouri, and author of *Elisabeth Hauptmann: Brecht's Silent Collaborator* (Peter Lang, 1995), agrees. Even in 1994, as Mr. Fuegi's forthcoming book was being discussed among Brecht scholars, she wrote in the journal *Theater* that Brecht always stamped the collective enterprise with his own distinctive themes and philosophies, and that the contributions of his collaborators, however indispensable, did not alter readings of the plays.

Ms. Hanssen has, over time, become less bothered by Brecht's comportment, she says: "All of them were involved in the cause of world socialism, and the Marxist stance was that we work together." Many scholars find the way he dealt with his collaborators "hard to take," but that is beside the point, she adds.

James K. Lyon, a professor of German literature at Brigham Young University and a forthright critic of Mr. Fuegi, goes farther: "The text-for-sex thesis doesn't hold," he says. When he interviewed key female collaborators late in their lives, they did not tell him that they were aggrieved at their working arrangements with Brecht, he says. "Certainly there was sex involved, but they recognized that he was an extremely bright and gifted person, and they felt they got more from him than they gave to him."

Herbert Blau, a professor of the humanities at the University of Washington who worked with Brecht's theater company, the Berliner Ensemble, after mounting an acclaimed American production of *Mother Courage* in 1955 -- and who knew Hauptmann and other actors, directors, and collaborators who worked with Brecht -- agrees with critics of Mr. Fuegi's book. "Given my sense of things and how it all happened," he concludes, the biography "is a warped web -- of what, I'd rather not say."

Carl Weber, a professor of directing and dramaturgy at Stanford University who joined the Berliner Ensemble in 1952 as an actor, dramaturge, and assistant director to Brecht, and who became one of the company's directors after Brecht's death, says the women whom Mr. Fuegi champions were simply not the sort of writers who could have produced such plays on their own. Worse still, he says, is the use Mr. Fuegi makes of them: "I knew these women. They were brilliant women, extremely sharp, but the way that Fuegi described them was as wimpy little women."

Mr. Fuegi has a consistent response to each such eyewitness: "He didn't know them in their productive years, so it's completely theoretical, what he has to say." Such critics, he says, "are simply wrong -- but it's easier to be wrong and say the same wrong things than

to go back and correct your work."

Has Mr. Fuegi's thesis been accepted by those who publish Brecht? Have new editions of his work come to correctly credit collaborators? "Almost completely not," he observes, because to do so would be "immensely financially disadvantageous. It would involve them in such an enormous imbroglio that they're not about to tackle it."

Man Among Women

Mr. Fuegi does, however, get credit for helping to inspire the scholarship published during the past 10 years on collaborators like Hauptmann, who, he argues, lifted Brecht productions to "the level of world-class theater."

"The share of the female collaborators" in Brecht's work "may have been underestimated before Fuegi went to the extreme opposite," says Siegfried Mews, a professor of Germanic languages at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who was one of four scholars who published an extensive rebuttal of *Brecht and Co.*, including a long list of corrections, in the 1995 edition of *The Brecht Yearbook*.

Scholars were writing, mostly in German, about the collaborators before *Brecht and Co.*'s appearance, but, says Ms. Hanssen, "his book and the PR have made a difference in the English-speaking world in how Brecht, as well as the collaborators are viewed -- not as glorified secretaries, but as co-authors."

Ms. Hanssen also agrees that, particularly in the former East Germany, Brecht scholars "were not particularly interested in having the collaborators' stories published."

"When I first started research on Hauptmann, in 1988," she recalls, "the then-director of the Brecht Archives [in Berlin] insisted they didn't have anything on her." But "after the Wall came down [in 1989], I was one of the first ones to see her papers there. They weren't archived -- they were in big grocery bags. But they're well organized now."

When Mr. Fuegi speaks today of his work, he does so with the earnestness of someone who believes he is discovering women's oppression on behalf of a world that has never noticed it. He points to a series of documentary films, *Women of Power*, that he is working on with his wife, Jo Francis, as a central pillar in this crusade.

Their first title, *Red Ruth: That Deadly Longing*, which won a Danish award as best film of 1992, is based on his treatment in *Brecht and Co.* of Ruth Berlau, a Danish novelist, actress, photographer, and director. Mr. Fuegi believes that she was a co-author of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *The Visions of Simon Machard*, and *The Good Woman of Szechuan*.

He and Ms. Francis have also made films about other women whom "the world doesn't seem to know a lot about," including Ada Byron Lovelace, daughter of Byron and an associate of Charles Babbage, a 19th-century pioneer of computing.

But Mr. Fuegi's role in championing Brecht's female collaborators has been questioned by feminist scholars. *Brecht and Co.* does a disservice to its own thesis, argues Sarah Bryant-Bertail, an associate professor of theory and criticism at the University of Washington, and author of *Space and Time in the Epic Theater: The Brechtian Legacy* (Camden House, 2000). Its tone, she argues, is one of "rescuing women like he's a knight in shining armor." Mr. Fuegi "ignores the usefulness of Brecht to feminism," she says.

"Brecht has been extremely important to us," agrees Janelle G. Reinelt, whose *After Brecht: British Epic Theater* (University of Michigan Press, 1994) traced the influence of the dramatist's theatrical innovations on a generation of British playwrights. A leading figure in feminist theater studies over the past 20 years, and now associate dean of graduate studies at the University of California at Irvine, Ms. Reinelt says Brecht "was a kind of creepy guy. No one is saying he was an ethical hero, and his dealings with women were not enlightened. But we try to make specific uses of his ideas and his writing."

If anything, she says, Mr. Fuegi's book blocked the publishing of feminist critiques of Brecht, because writers such as herself were loath to seem to align themselves with him. "Fuegi was too puffed up with himself about his book, and meanspirited and a cold-war warrior, too, in the end," she says. "We were all Left, and we didn't have much time for that."

A Happy Ending?

Whatever the reality of Brecht's biography, some experts do appreciate Mr. Fuegi's rather Brechtian provocations. Brecht scholarship needed a good kick in the pants, contends Mr. Gilman, of Illinois. Since the 1980s, he says, Brecht studies has been so bogged down in boring exegesis and hagiography that neither poststructuralist nor feminist approaches, nor even Mr. Fuegi's overarching study, have been able to revive it.

"I don't think John's book had much of an impact," he says. "Not because the book is wrong. It is, of course, overstated." But Brecht has become, "in the most negative, uninteresting way, a classical writer, which in Germany is the kiss of death." Brecht productions, even in Germany, and especially at the Berliner Ensemble (which Brecht founded with his second wife, Helene Weigel), have been "so infinitely boring and stupid as to be beyond belief."

Where, he asks, is the complex, contrarian character that Brecht embodied?

Mr. Gilman awaits a grand feminist or psychoanalytic reading of Brecht. Meanwhile, he says, the playwright has suffered the fate of being taught in German schools and staged in student and provincial productions in the United States. He has become "the sort of dramatist who has absolutely no relevance to the contemporary theater." For whatever reason, "Brecht has simply vanished as a player." And in North America and elsewhere, "the last 10 years in Brecht studies have been incredibly sad, incredibly sad."

The disruptive bluster of Mr. Fuegi's book cannot excuse a lack of fuller engagement, he argues. "Sure it was overstated. Good biographies always are. ... The obligation of a good biography is to give us counternarratives, and I think John's book did that elegantly."

Some observers suggest that it is in the theater that Brecht will find a new hearing. Though stylistically at odds with the predominant realism of American theater, Brecht's "epic" style has been championed by the acclaimed American playwright Tony Kushner, whose sprawling two-play masterpiece *Angels in America* tackled the immense sociopolitical themes of sexuality, race, religion, and politics in the era of AIDS. Like Mr. Kushner today, says Irvine's Ms. Reinelt, "Brecht was always looking at the larger social group and was opposed to bourgeois individualism or psychological realism."

Perhaps, suggests Mr. Blau of the University of Washington, a Brecht revival is simply waiting for "somebody really sophisticated in everything from, say, body art and installations to digitality and the virtual, and with some fine, nuanced, now-you-see-it-and-mostly-don't moral perception besides, ... to take him on, by doing what we did years ago in a production of *Galileo* -- turning Brechtian method upon him, alienating those shifty texts."

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Brecht in Context

By PETER MONAGHAN

New York

The theater critic, playwright, and stage actor Eric Bentley is the foremost English-speaking authority on Bertolt Brecht. He collaborated with the contentious and brilliant German writer extensively before Brecht's death, in 1956. He also translated and produced many of Brecht's plays, becoming the playwright's right-hand man in America.

The British-born Bentley came to the United States in his early 20s to do graduate work at Yale University. His New York City apartment is a trove of theater history, decorated with original posters from productions of his own plays and those by Brecht.

Now 87, Mr. Bentley retains a razor-sharp intellect. Recent American theater criticism, he suggests, has been too much about biography, sociology, and psychoanalysis, and not enough about dramaturgy. That trend, he says, has not been kind to Brecht's legacy.

Academic studies of Brecht have a "tendency toward a cult, and you feel that the members of it are groupies, to some extent," he says. And yet too many Brecht scholars "are not competent to discuss theatrical art, because they don't know anything about it."

They've read Mr. Brecht's works and his theoretical statements that it's all original, but they don't know if it's all original or not, because they've not read the other stuff, and they don't really believe in the close reading of texts or close watching of theater."

Brecht may have himself to blame, says Mr. Bentley. Highlighting political postures over stagecraft was professionally advantageous in Weimar Germany. Back then, he says, playwrights were often considered good only "insofar as they were Marxists, or insofar as they delivered this message."

But those were different times. And the emphasis on politics and personality over the plays means that the present and the future of Brecht theater remain uncertain, says Mr. Bentley.

During his own career in theater, Mr. Bentley says, the dominant attitude of Brecht insiders toward their standard-bearer has undergone a major change.

What Would Bertolt Want?

While Brecht was alive, and for some time after his death, both the playwright and then his acolytes insisted on a Brechtian theater done in the way he wanted. "All one asked in that era was, 'Are they getting him right?' And the answer was always, 'No' -- unless they had had the direct intervention of Brecht and his immediate entourage, in which I was included."

That tight-fisted approach always risked indifferent results, he says. "In the 50s, here in New York, I directed *The Good Woman of Szechuan*, and I wanted to show New York the Brecht kind of production. But because I was so keen on getting everything right," he says with a chuckle, "I rather carelessly omitted to make it a powerful production."

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union "and the death of the whole *apparat* that Brecht belonged to," one must ask "different questions in a different context," says Mr. Bentley. Now, "one just accepts him as one of a great number of playwrights of that era, to whose work you bring whatever you've got from your knowledge of the whole thing, not just him."

Although Mr. Bentley was part of the inner circle around Brecht, he believes that the writer's demotion from the pedestal on which he had been placed by true believers -- partly a result of John Fuegi's 1995 biography, *Brecht and Co.: Sex, Politics, and the Making of the Modern Drama* -- is "all to the good. I thought the cult was dangerous and pernicious and often political, in the sense of being part of the cold-war apparatus of Russia against America," he says, with a hint of indignation. "And that's all over now. We have other things on our minds."

He pauses. "I'm saying he's just one author among others, but I'm not denying that he's one great author among other great authors."

Can Brecht be made relevant today? The question moves Mr. Bentley to consider the roots of one of Brecht's most famous plays. "Do you know how *Mother Courage* was originally written?" he asks. "It's almost a scandal to say it. It was written in the fall of 1939 to express Stalin's view that the war between Hitler and the West was just a war between two imperialisms, and America should stay out of it. So it was a pacifist play, communistically backed. ... Within two years, Brecht didn't want it performed, because the Soviet Union was now in the war."

99 Percent

Was Brecht terribly naïve to think that he could return to East Berlin after that war and find a socialist utopia?

"Well, yes, it certainly looks glaring that way, in retrospect," says Mr. Bentley. "But at the time, in that generation, when I look at my own youth as a student and what I championed in the 30s, I was more naïve than Mr. Brecht. So I can't cast any stones."

Of course, says Mr. Bentley, Brecht was a product of his time. "The German intelligentsia were disillusioned with democracy, the attempt at democracy in the 20s, and they didn't try to help it. They moved to the left or to the right. The choice was between Hitler and Stalin for them, and Brecht chose Stalin from the beginning. And even when he found out the bad things about Stalin, he'd say, 'Well, that happens in times of crisis. Stalin isn't as great a man as Lenin' -- Lenin remained a god for that group -- 'but you have to take the rough with the smooth and it will all work out well.'"

"Not many of his plays are just straightforward Stalinist propaganda," Mr. Bentley says. There is a hint of uncertainty in Brecht. "I always said about him and his female entourage ... that the women were always 101 percent communist, but he was only 99."

But even at 99 percent communist, Brecht had a harsher message for America than American audiences generally realize. "He would want the audience to see, which I think they seldom do, that *Mother Courage* is saying war is a result of capitalism -- and if you concede that, then you can't abolish war without abolishing capitalism. Even among somewhat radical youth, or so on, I don't think the message of his plays as he intended it gets through at all in America. And if it did, the plays perhaps wouldn't be done."

That, too, clearly amuses Mr. Bentley. "That is, colleges do *The Good Woman of Szechuan* without realizing that ideologically it's nothing but an attack on capitalism, an analysis of his view on how capitalism operates. And there can be no answer but to get rid of it and get something else. I don't think that comes through. There are numerous human touches all the way through that do come through, that are observations of his.

"I think also," he continues, "that in some of the plays that invite you to some kind of optimism, you don't feel the optimism. Most of the great modern writers, their desperation and despair is given great reality and vividness. That was Brecht's state of mind in the 20s, but he felt redeemed through communism into something positive. There

had to be something, or he would have had to kill himself. He was so negative.

"But seeing to the heart of what is wrong and what is depressing, that was his talent, as an analyst of people. So it remains the main thing."

Even Brecht's early plays, Mr. Bentley says, "were about how cruel life is. Later he wanted people to believe it's just the capitalist system: It is cruel. If you abolish it, you've got a happy, uncruel world. Well, when he met up with real Communism, in East Germany, and people who had worked with Stalin, he realized these people have not the slightest belief that there will suddenly be a beautiful world where everybody loves each other. They're all killers."

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Playing Brecht

By PETER MONAGHAN

The controversies sparked by John Fuegi's book *Brecht and Co.: Sex, Politics, and the Making of the Modern Drama* have been reflected in a number of worldwide theatrical and film productions in the past decade, including appearances by the Dutch cabaret performer Jasperina de Jong and the New Zealand playwright Jean Betts's 2003 play, *The Collective*.

Fred Newman's play *Revising Germany*, which acknowledges a heavy debt to Mr. Fuegi's work, and in which the central figures in the Brecht enterprise interact in a cabaret setting, has just finished a one-month run in New York City. Prudence Johnson's piece *Kurt and Bert: The Last Days of Weimar With Weill and Brecht*, which she first performed in Minneapolis in October 2003, is a depiction of Elisabeth Hauptmann as Mr. Fuegi portrays her in *Brecht & Co.* -- author of much of the dialogue in *The Threepenny Opera* and probably the lyrics set to Kurt Weill's score as well. "I'm not a Brecht scholar, but I thought it seemed really well researched," says Ms. Johnson, who also relied on Paula J. Hanssen's book *Elisabeth Hauptmann: Brecht's Silent Collaborator*.

Brecht's relationships with women are an anchor for Rick Mitchell's *Brecht in L.A.* (2003), which describes the playwright's tumultuous stay in Los Angeles (1941 to 1947) after he fled Europe to elude the Nazis. Mr. Mitchell's play sets Brecht's efforts to have his plays produced in America while under surveillance by agents for the U.S. House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee against an account of the misery inflicted by Brecht on both his wife Helene Weigel and his mistress and collaborator Ruth Berlau.

The complex personal and professional relationships between Brecht and the women in his life are also depicted in Jan Schütte's film *The Farewell: Brecht's Last Summer*

(2000), a melancholy film set shortly before the playwright's death.

No Communist?

Brecht's run-ins with U.S. intelligence services fuel *The Brecht File*, by George Tabori, a 2000 theatrical adaptation of his 1990 screenplay. The work, based on Brecht's declassified FBI file, incorporates an account of his crafty appearance before HUAC in 1947, when he broke ranks with Hollywood leftists by declaring that he was not a Communist. (That statement apparently was, strictly speaking, true, as he seems never to have joined the Communist Party.)

The American playwright Charles L. Mee has a different approach. Rather than take a simple moral stand, his play *Full Circle* (2000) uses Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* to cast a skeptical eye on his moral universe.

In Brecht's play, a ruler decides which of two women deserves a child, whom both claim as their own, by asking them to compete in pulling it from a circle; the one who declines to risk injuring the child is awarded custody.

Mr. Mee set *Full Circle* in East Berlin in 1989, as the Berlin Wall crumbles. When Erich Honecker, the country's Communist leader, and his wife flee, they leave behind their baby. A wealthy American tourist and a student radical care for the child until the German playwright Heiner Müller -- an heir to the Brecht tradition -- is called upon to judge who should keep the child.

Mr. Mee's play presents Brecht's treatment of the dilemma as utopian and naïve. Sander L. Gilman, a longtime Brecht observer, admires *Full Circle*. "The only way to make Brecht interesting," he says, "is to put him into his own drama."

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